

APPENDIX C

LEO STRAUSS: “THE INTELLECTUAL SITUATION OF THE PRESENT” (1932)¹

Introduction: *captatio benevolentiae*

The topic is *disreputable*. A proper scholar² adjusts his ambition to speaking only on topics he has expert knowledge of, that is, on topics whose material he knows and has adequately worked through intellectually. I do not have the reassuring awareness:³ here no one can damage or hurt me, here I am knowledgeable, as regards this evening’s topic. I am not a specialist in the present: I have neither climbed all its heights nor descended into all its nooks. The awareness that it is *impossible* to be a specialist in the present probably prompts people who care about their scholarly prestige to stay away from this topic.

If I nevertheless put up for discussion the intellectual situation of the present, it is because I feel emboldened by the following consideration. Certainly it is very fine and comfortable to be able to step forth as if clad in iron armor. But the armor of scholarship always clads a being scarcely made of iron—namely, a human being who questions. Now, there are questions that are hard to ask and even harder to answer, so that one would really prefer to deny they exist. But they force themselves onto us: we ask them and we answer them—even if with the worst conscience. Now, the precaution of not doing things in public that one does secretly with a bad conscience is certainly very prudent; but perhaps *too* prudent; is it not almost

¹[Leo Strauss, “*Die geistige Lage der Gegenwart*,” GS-2 441–64, 623.] Unpublished. Bound manuscript with 12 written pages (three of them loose) and inscribed cover, in ink, with additions and corrections in pencil. Two pages (two sides) with the draft of an alternative introduction under the title *Preliminary Remark* and a further sheet (two pages) attached with the plan of the lecture, all in pencil. On the cover and on the first page of the manuscript, Strauss has noted: 6.II.1932. Leo Strauss Papers, Box 8, Folder 6, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library. {HM}

²Ger.: *Wissenschaftler*. Or: scientist (depending on the field of study).

³Ger.: *Bewusstsein*. Or: consciousness (henceforth depending on the context).

already *cowardice*?⁴ Therefore, if we do not want to be cowards, we should admit that now and again we nevertheless think about the intellectual situation of the present and hence under certain conditions express these thoughts among ourselves {442}. They are not entirely absurd, after all—perhaps they will even be of some use for our respectable scholarly work as well. That being said, on to the subject-matter.

1. *What does the intellectual situation of the present matter to us Jews?* It matters to us insofar as the *present situation of Judaism* matters to us.

Both the dissolution process and the consolidation process determined in a European manner.⁵

That seems paradoxical: Does not the consolidation, in contradistinction to Jewish self-renunciation, have the character of Jewish self-reflection, of the return and retreat to Judaism? Does it not have the *restitutio in integrum* as its aim? Is not the integrity of Judaism the guiding thought of the Jewish movement?

In order to recognize the European determination of the consolidation process, one need only look at the 3 steps of this process in a row.

1. *Political Zionism*. People as a natural group of human beings, which is held together by a common enemy; national association as an imperative of *honor*. *Difference from the tradition*: Pinsker's⁶ motive. Trust in oneself versus trust in God (not: power vs. spirit).
2. *Cultural Zionism*. Jewish tradition turns into the stuff of a European behavior: Jewish humanism. Ahad Ha'am⁷ and Hegel. *Difference from the tradition*: not revelation but development.
3. *Return to the Law*. Rosenzweig⁸ and Elective Affinities.⁹ *Difference: the Law as such*. In principle: European *reservations* against the tradition (Cohen, *The Social Ideal*)¹⁰—or renunciation of European *prejudices*. In either case: the situation of the present matters to us.

⁴Ger.: *Duckmäuserei*. Or: hypocrisy.

⁵Ger.: *europäisch bedingt*.

⁶Leo Pinsker (1821–91). See his *Autoemancipation* (1882) in *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, ed. Arthur Hertzberg (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 181–98. Cf. *LSEW* 104.

⁷Ahad Ha'am, pen name of Asher Hirsch Ginsberg (1856–1927), the “founder of cultural Zionism” (Strauss, Preface to *SCR*, in *JPCM* 144–45 with 341, 355n41). See Ahad Ha'am's address to the First Zionist Congress (1897), in *JWM* 541–43. Cf. *LSEW* 81, 119, 131, 203–4.

⁸See note 3 of appendix B.

⁹Ger.: *die Wahlverwandschaften*. That is, the title of Goethe's novel. Rosenzweig understands the term to mean “the maze of feeling” in contrast to “the maze of action” (the emphasis is Rosenzweig's); see *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (2nd ed.; New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 13. Cf. Strauss, Preface to *SCR*, in *JPCM* 153.

¹⁰Hermann Cohen (1842–1919): “in the middle of World War I, the greatest representative of German Jewry and spokesman for it, the most powerful figure among the German professors of philosophy of his time, stated his view on Jerusalem and Athens in a lecture entitled ‘The Social Ideal in Plato and the Prophets’” (Strauss, JA, in *JPCM* 398–99); see Cohen, “Das soziale Ideal bei Platon und den Propheten,” *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften* (3 vols.; Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke & Sohn, 1924), I, 306–30. Cf. *LSEW* 76, 107, 109–10, 112–14, 134, 139–73, 216, etc.; Strauss, Preface to *SCR*, in *JPCM* 154, 158–59, and “Introductory Essay to Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*,” in *JPCM* 267–82; and chapter 4 of the present volume.

What does the intellectual situation of the present matter to us Jews? It matters to us insofar as the present situation of Judaism matters to us; for the present situation of Judaism is at the same time determined by Judaism's past, by Jewish history *and* by the present world situation. The determination of the Jewish situation at any given time by two factors—by Judaism and by the world—has existed at least for as long as we have lived in the Galut.¹¹ Determination by the second factor has considerably *intensified*, so much that it has *changed* fundamentally since the beginning of the age of assimilation and the *dissolution* of the Jewish tradition dating from this age. Now, in the last decades, the {443} dissolution process has been countered by the attempt at a *consolidation* of the setting of Jewish life,¹² by Zionism in particular. But no one who knows this attempt from seeing for himself and does not judge it by its surface can fail to see that it is by dint of *European* thoughts and demands that the consolidation of Judaism is being attempted in our time. For example, it may be true—though in the end it is not as true as most people believe—that Jewish socialism has its origin in the demands and promises of the Prophets: this socialism would not have been able to receive its present form without the authoritative influence of European ideas. *The consolidation of the setting of Jewish life is no less determined in a European manner*¹³ *than is the dissolution of Jewish tradition preceding it.* That seems paradoxical. Is not this consolidation precisely the consequence of Jewish self-reflection in contrast to Jewish self-renunciation in the age of assimilation?

Now this determination can be evaluated in various ways. One can say: we have *learned* many things from Europe in the last 150 years, much that is dubious, but nevertheless also a few things of undoubted value; that is, we have learned a few things that we could not have learned from the Jewish tradition; we thereby have certain *reservations* vis-à-vis the Jewish tradition, *European* reservations; what ensues accordingly is this demand: that the consolidation of the setting of Jewish life be carried out in a manner that takes into account these reservations that cannot be renounced; and for just that reason we must be concerned with Europe.

One thing about this view¹⁴ cannot be disputed: it is *upright*; it does not make the task comfortable for itself; it does not smuggle in foreign elements under the cover of the Jewish flag, that is, by the use of biblical and talmudic passages torn out of context. But it causes a certain unease, since it is alarmingly reminiscent of the view of *Reform*¹⁵ that wanted to renew Judaism by making it up-to-date and that thereby only rendered Judaism hollow and sentimental. Over and against all attempts at Reform, the argument of S. R. Hirsch¹⁶ will always remain victorious—that it would be contradictory to measure the eternal by standards of time.

¹ Heb.: Exile.

¹¹ Ger.: *jüdischen Lebenszusammenhangs*.

¹² Ger.: *europäisch bedingt*.

¹³ [Note in the margin:] Example Cohen's "The Social Ideal in Plato and the Prophets" {HM}

¹⁴ That is, the "reformation of Judaism sought by enlightened Jews [comprising] not simply a diminution of the ritual burdens of the Jew but also an elimination or, at least, a blurring of the ethnic and national features of traditional Judaism" (*JWM* 156).

¹⁵ Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–88), German rabbi and intellectual founder of neo-Orthodoxy. See his "Religion Allied to Progress" (1854) and "A Sermon on the Science of Judaism" (1855) in *JMW* 197–202, 234–35. Cf. CaM 184n58–58, with APT n58 as supplemented in *LSMC* 603n58.

Let us make these facts a bit clearer to ourselves. The Jewish {444} problem, whose urgency in the age of National Socialism scarcely needs proof, forced out of Herzl¹⁷ the idea of the Jewish national state, which then, simply for reasons of realistic politics, was altered into the idea of the Jewish national home in Palestine. Herzl imagined this state as being exactly like a European state. But whereas in European states the national state idea was indissolubly connected with the national culture—I recall the significance of the French Revolution for the original French nationalism, and of France's Catholic tradition for today's French nationalism—merely political Zionism lacked that sort of native soil: Herzl's Palestine was in Ahad Ha'am's opinion nothing else than a Jewish Liberia. Thus Zionism was led from being merely political Zionism to being cultural Zionism, the demand for national culture, and that means: the care and development of the Jewish tradition came to be accepted. Now, no one could overlook that things are different with Jewish culture than with the cultures of other peoples. Jewish culture is identical with learning and fulfilling the Law. Thus many cultural Zionists were led to acceptance of the Law and submission to the Law, and so Zionism was getting ever closer to Jewish tradition. There arose the possibility that European reservations vis-à-vis the Jewish tradition were no longer even possible and necessary: *the integrity of Judaism* seemed to become possible again.

Now there is something awkward about acceptance of the Law by cultural Zionism, since according to the view of Jewish tradition Jewish Law is a Law given by God. Were the Law to prescribe only actions and prohibitions, it could in the end be fulfilled also by unbelievers; but it also and especially prescribes prayers: how should he pray who does not believe in God? The atheistic Zionist is hence confronted with the question, *why* does he not believe in God? Since the unbelief of a Jew in our time is nothing else than the general unbelief, the atheistic Zionist, in any case, sees himself compelled to concern himself with the intellectual situation of the present.

But not only he. Those Jews of our time who took an active part in the consolidation process, who in this way came to {445} accept the Law and who have not been driven mad by the difficulty of believing in God, conceive of the Law differently than the Jewish tradition. I recall the outstanding man of this group, Franz Rosenzweig, who reproaches Jewish orthodoxy for de facto having granted priority to prohibitions over commands (e.g., with respect to שבת);¹⁸ in contrast, he wants to regard prohibitions only as the other side of commands. In his struggle against the rigidity of the Law, he goes so far as to want to dissolve entirely the distinction between *minhag* and *din*.¹⁹

The question concerning the intellectual situation of the present is *ambiguous*: it can be understood in a way that is matter-of-fact or in a way that is vain; it can

¹⁷Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), father of political Zionism, founder of the World Zionist Organization, and author of *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jews' State*; 1896). See his "A Solution of the Jewish Question," in *JMW* 533–38. Cf. *LSEW* 81, 83–87, 102, 119, 128, 203, with the editor's note at 82n2.

¹⁸Heb.: *shabbos*. That is, "Sabbath," transliterated according to the Ashkenazic (Germanic) pronunciation.

¹⁹Heb.: custom...law. See, for example, *Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. Glatzer, 233–47; cf. Strauss, Preface to *SCR*, in *JPCM* 153.

serve the seriousness of self-reflection or the frivolousness of self-satisfaction and self-assurance. We want to come to a rather drastic distinction between the serious and the vain question concerning the intellectual situation of the present. We begin *prior* to this distinction; we pretend as if the question were *not* ambiguous.

Let us suppose then that this question is straightforward—it is however *not natural*. In order to see this, one need only consider the following: at any time there existed an “intellectual situation of the present”; but no one concerned himself with it; no one ever knew *that* there was an “intellectual situation of the present.” Thoughtful people concerned themselves with the eternal; and the temporal—the temporal that was important from [the point of view of] the eternal and for the sake of the eternal was never the present but rather the past, the *old*: what was founded in the past and has lasted for a long time has stood the test of time; and what has stood the test of time has the opinion going for it that it is true. In contrast, the present, the new, is held to be suspect; it is only for a brief while, it is brief, short-lived, a momentary ripple not worth one’s attention. In recalling this earlier way of thinking one understands that interest in the intellectual situation of the present is not *natural* to man but is tied to certain *historical* conditions, that it really is something of *the present*. Thus we get our first answer to the question about the *intellectual situation of the present*: this situation is characterized {446} by the question about it. If, then, we wish to understand the intellectual situation of the present, we must ask: *why* does the whole world today ask about the intellectual situation of the present?

This question cannot be settled by the statement: well, we live *today*, and therefore what happens today is of greater importance for us than what happened in the past. This answer is justified regarding all practical tasks, small and large. If I want to buy myself a hat, then what matters to me are the present hat designs and the present hat prices only; if someone wants to get married, then what matters to him are the provisions of the German Civil Code only and he does not need to take an interest in Roman law or the Code of Hammurabi; what interests the statesman is only the present constellation of powers, etc., etc. But if one asks about the *principles* of action, about *the* right and good, then it is conceivable that here it would be extremely dubious to let oneself become involved with the present: namely, assuming that the present were an age of decline. Why then do we inquire today about the intellectual situation of the present *as a matter of principle*²¹—and not for instance about the intellectual situation of the biblical time or of the Greek golden age?

One need only ask the question in this form in order to already have the answer: were these ages for us still the classic ages, the authoritative ages, then *they* would be at the center of our interest. But precisely this is characteristic of our age: that the old *traditions*—the tradition of the Bible and the tradition of Greek philosophy—have lost their power. The 17th and 18th centuries, the Age of *Enlightenment*, has won *freedom from all tradition*. The fact that a particular doctrine or institution can invoke, be it the Bible, be it Plato or Aristotle, no longer compels us.

The Enlightenment won the freedom from traditions by fighting the traditions in the name of the *principles* of the tradition: it fought against Aristotelian-scholastic

²¹ Ger.: in prinzipieller Absicht.

science in the name of the Greek principle of science; it fought against the intolerance of Judaism and Christianity in the name of the biblical principle of love of one's neighbor. The 19th century radicalized this fight of the Enlightenment: it challenged the *principles* of the tradition; it called into question science as such and love of neighbor as such; it tore down the *pillars* on which the European world is built. This decisive act, this *completion {447} of the Enlightenment*, is tied and will always remain tied to the name of Friedrich Nietzsche.

Not only the traditions but the principles of the tradition were called into question by Nietzsche. The freedom of thinking that had been won by the Enlightenment, the freedom to think the opposite of what the Middle Ages had thought has become infinitely exceeded; we are *completely free*. But free for what? Have the principles of the tradition been replaced by other binding principles? Not at all. We therefore do not *know* at all *what* we are free for, what we live for, what the right and good are according to which we can be at peace with ourselves. *Our freedom is the freedom of radical ignorance*. The intellectual situation of the present is characterized by our knowing nothing anymore, by our knowing nothing.

Out of the recognition and admission of this ignorance grows the necessity of *questioning*, questioning about the right and good. And here the following paradox presents itself: while the present is as *compelled to question as any age*, it is *less capable of questioning than any age*. We *must* question without being *capable* of questioning. From this embarrassment arises the question concerning the intellectual situation of the present.

If someone says today that the first and most urgent question is the question concerning the right life and that this question must be answered by reason, that is, scientifically, then the present confronts him with the verdict: this question cannot be answered by scientific means; the answer to this question can be only a *value judgment*, and value judgments cannot be justified and cannot be refuted by scientific means; they rest on will or on belief, on the free decision of the person. Since that is so, a universally binding knowledge about the right life is not possible—there exists at bottom a “polytheism of values.” The *de facto anarchy* is thus *claimed* to be necessary and thereby consolidated.

I do not have the possibility here of proving with the requisite thoroughness the untenability of this utterly unphilosophical view, that is, a view that cuts off the real question. This proof would be identical with a radical critique of the life's work of Max Weber.²¹ Here I would prefer only to recall two points. 1) The concept of “value judgment” presupposes that there are judgments that are not value judgments—hence properly scientific judgments; it is in this sense that value-free science mattered to Weber. Now it is not **{448}** that difficult to show that Weber's science, which he intended to be value-free, is wholly conditioned by his value judgments; these are the ultimate presuppositions of his scientific research. 2) Now Weber has in no way shirked the clarification of these presuppositions; on the contrary: his whole scientific life's work aims precisely at this clarification, that is, the understanding of its presuppositions from their history; thereby he provided himself with an altogether different basis than a merely personal decision.

²¹ Cf. “Conspicivism” (appendix A), note 40.

In principle: the “free decision of the person” that does not want to depend on any justification “does not take place in a vacuum.” It is conditioned by the *history* in which the person concerned stands. The knowledge of man’s being conditioned by the history that is *his* history is called *historical consciousness*. The historical consciousness that develops into historical *science* is the closest counterauthority against the ruling anarchy: as science, historical science makes possible universal validity.

But as it happens, historical consciousness is just that factor that thwarts the question concerning the right life. For if man is essentially historical, then there is not *the* right life; but each age, each historical situation has *its* “right life,” *its* ideal of life. *Therefore* we cannot ask about *the* right life, but only about *our* right life, about the ideal of life that is *up-to-date*,²² the right life of the *present*. But how to know what ideal of life is the one suitable to the present? That is possible only if the *situation* of the present is known.

We began from the fact that the intellectual life of the present is characterized by the *question* concerning the intellectual situation of the present. We asked about the *reason*²³ for this question. The reason for this question is the necessity to ask about the right life. Under the presuppositions of historical consciousness the question concerning the right life *compels us to ask the question concerning the intellectual situation of the present*.

Because man is essentially historical, there are no eternal principles, no eternal ideal of life. One can thus not ask about *the* ideal of life, but only, at best, about the present ideal of life. In order to determine the present ideal of life, one must know the present *situation*. The present situation is known in the life of the present, which we grasp above all in the intellectual productions of the present. {449}

Now, these productions themselves, however, have the character—explicitly or implicitly—of answers to the question concerning *the*—or rather concerning the present—ideal of life. And these answers are all in contradiction with one another. The situation of the present—it consists in the *contradictions* of the present. That is why one can only extract a unified ideal of life from the situation of the present if these contradictions can be resolved in the form of a higher unity: the present ideal of life would be the *synthesis* of these actual answers that are effective today. But such a synthesis is impossible. What is the higher synthesis supposed to be in which Marx’s and Nietzsche’s ideal of life—the conviction that exploitation is bad in itself and the conviction that the abolition²⁴ of exploitation is the abolition of life—could be unified? Or how is a synthesis of capitalism and communism imaginable? Whoever proposes a synthesis here is confusing synthesis with compromise.

But even granted that a synthesis of the answers effective at present were possible, it is a question whether this synthesis would disclose for us the *real* situation of the present. For if all of today’s positions *are mistaken about a basic character of the present situation*, then this fundamental defect cannot be disposed of by the synthesis of these positions: on the contrary, a synthesis would only reinforce this defect.

²² Ger.: *zeitgemäß*.

²³ Ger.: *Grund*.

²⁴ Ger.: *Aufhebung*.

Allegedly, the situation of the present is knowable from the present positions. How does one recognize that a position is a present one? Surely not by its being represented in a writing published in 1932. Even now books still appear that are written from the standpoint of Thomas Aquinas, from a standpoint, that is, that no one will so easily describe as being a present one. In order to recognize a standpoint as a present one, one must already have a guiding idea of the present. And this guiding idea can be gained only from the knowledge of the entire historical process out of which the present comes. In any case, the situation of the present cannot be known *from* the present.

What is present may be said only on the basis of a knowledge of the entire course of history. Now, this course is open to extremely different interpretations. Which of these interpretations is the right one? There seem to be as many possibilities as there are present positions. If the anarchy of present positions is not {450} overcome,²⁵ then the question of which interpretation of the entire course of history is the right one cannot be answered. And since we can determine the situation of the present only if we can answer this question, *the situation of the present is not determinable, not knowable.*

Allegedly, the situation of the present is knowable from the entirety of positions effective in the present. Why from *all* these positions? Because they are equivalent. Why are they equivalent? Because each one sees facts that are not seen or seen only vaguely by the others. But obviously it is not seeing everything equally clearly that is important—but seeing clearly what is important and vaguely what is not important. For if one position looks at the world from the frog's perspective and another looks at it from the bird's perspective, there is surely no doubt which of these positions takes priority. I must therefore already know beforehand which facts are important. But this presupposes that I know what is important. But if I know this, then I know which life is the right one, and I do not need to ask about the situation of the present at all.

Now as it happens, the reason why we ask about the situation of the present is the fact that we do not know what is right. And it turns out that the question concerning the situation of the present cannot be answered. Thus the question concerning what is right cannot be answered at all. Thus the radical ignorance remains and must remain. We are thus condemned to live without orientation; that is, we cannot live at all. Let us attempt to determine this inability of ours to live more exactly.

The intellectual situation of the present is determined by the historical consciousness. This means that eternal, unconditional principles of living are not recognized: all that is left are conditional, precisely historically conditioned principles. Now, in our world, fundamentally different historical principles are effective, but these can now no longer be summed up in *one* universally binding, eternal order: the polytheism of values, *anarchy*, rules. Now the fact cannot be completely forgotten that in earlier times eternal, unconditional principles knowable to reason *itself*, and hence an order, were held to be possible and necessary.

²⁵ Ger.: *aufgehoben*. Cf. the previous note.

This belief is now considered *naive*: we know based on a radical *reflection* that rational knowledge about *the* right is not possible. Being more radically reflective, we are *superior* to the past. {451} Do we not *thus* have knowledge as an unconditional standard? No; for we merely say: *if* knowledge is the ideal of life, then the more radical knowledge is preferable to the more naive knowledge; but *that* knowledge is the ideal of life is itself historically conditioned. In fact, conditioned by the European tradition founded by the Greeks. In the non-European worlds there are completely different ideals of life, and it is impossible for us to hold these worlds to be inferior to us on account of their naivety. Hence the result: historical consciousness leads to the awareness of superiority over the European past and the awareness of the complete equality of non-European ideals; and in many cases: contempt for the European past and prostration before everything exotic. Now, it is natural to man to treasure and *cultivate* what is his own, what is handed down to him by his forebears, whereas he *confronts* what is foreign proudly, suspiciously, cautiously, at most with respect and admiration. Measured by this natural stance, the stance dominant in Europe today appears to be antinatural, *perverse*. Our inability to live, which manifests itself in our inability to question, is our unnaturalness, the unnaturalness of our world.

Nonetheless we, too, are still in a certain way natural beings. And even if, in this respect, we had to despair in the face of ourselves, the fact that even today children are generated naturally and born naturally could reassure us. And even if these children become corrupted soon enough by the dominant unnaturalness, there yet remains the hope, so long as there are human beings on the earth, that some day human beings will be able to be natural again.

We, too, are still natural beings. That we are still natural shows itself in the fact that we, confronted with the ignorance of what is right, escape into the *question* concerning what is right—escape from the unnaturalness of our situation. The *need* to know, and therefore the questioning, is the best guarantee that we are still natural beings, humans—but that we *are not capable of* questioning is the clear symptom of our being threatened in our humanity in a way that humans have never been threatened.

Under the presupposition of historical consciousness, the question concerning the right life compels us to ask the question concerning the intellectual situation of the present. Since *this* question cannot be answered, then the question concerning {452} the right life seems no longer answerable. Should it be answerable, this would be possible only by *calling historical consciousness into question*. But is this not a fantastic undertaking? *How* may historical consciousness be called into question? By recognizing basically this: historical consciousness is itself historically conditioned, therefore itself destined to give way to another consciousness. There is a world, that is, a real, historical world beyond historical consciousness. That this possibility exists *in principle* no one will dispute. But, it will be said, this world is the barbarism that awaits us no matter what; historical consciousness will go away if humanity unlearns what it has learned arduously enough over the past centuries; the renunciation of historical consciousness is identical with the relapse into a stage of lesser reflection.

Let us pause here for a moment. Historical consciousness is—one cannot emphasize this strongly enough—according to its own view a stage of higher awareness: we know *more* than the earlier generations; we know more deeply, more profoundly, than the earlier ones that everything human is historically conditioned. But as it happens historical consciousness is the reason why, although we are compelled to question, we are incapable of questioning. *Thus* we are more incapable of questioning than the earlier generations—since we know more, since we know too much. But we are compelled to question since at bottom we know *nothing*. Being fundamentally *ignorant we cannot come to knowledge since we know too much*. Since we *believe* we know too much. We will not be able to remove our radical ignorance until this belief that we know is abolished.

Historical consciousness includes in itself the conviction that we stand at a higher stage of reflection than earlier human beings: we regard ourselves as having *progressed*. Now there are without question many men especially today who are of the opinion that our age is an age of decline. But precisely such men are mostly of the opinion that the character of decline of our time has its reason in our being too conscious, that in our time knowledge plays a role not allotted to it in healthy times; precisely such men usually believe that there are opportunities for coming to knowledge as there have never been before (Spengler);²⁶ they are of the opinion that precisely *because* today it is twilight, the owl of Minerva could begin its flight. That we have progressed is quite the dominant opinion. {453}

But how do things really stand concerning our progressiveness? Our progressiveness could only be the result of the modern development. Let us therefore question the history of this development.

The modern centuries are dominated by the pathos of progress in knowledge and through knowledge. At the beginning of the modern development stands the fight against scholastic science. This science was stagnating; it essentially did nothing other than transmit and explain Aristotle. Regarding physics, within which the fight primarily took place, the founders of modern philosophy and physics were astonished at the fact that the Scholastic philosophers investigated not nature but—Aristotle. (Cremonini.)²⁷ This was possible only because Scholasticism presupposed explicitly or implicitly that science was essentially completed: one did not see a *possibility* of advancing; one did *not* have the *intention* of advancing; one *did not have confidence* in advancing. Modern philosophy begins with the completely opposite intention: *plus ultra*. One can illustrate this opposition in the following manner. Science emerged with the Greeks in an age of civic flourishing, as a concern of free citizens; it had its center in the city of Athens, of whose citizens Thucydides writes that they are always ready to *hope*, always anxious to discover something new—as opposed to the Lacedaemonians, who regard science with mistrust, who are *not* hopeful, little confident in their ability, holding on to the old. Scholastic science was (at least in Christendom) pursued by monks. The newer philosophy is once again

²⁶ Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), *Der Untergang des Abendlands* [*The Decline of the West*] (1918); cf. PoR 100.

²⁷ Cesare Cremonini (1550–1631). Prolific expositor of Aristotle; accused of Averroism.

the concern of free citizens, who, as once were the Athenians, were ready to hope and keen to do something new again. Full of self-confidence did one thus confront classical philosophy; it was not long until a dispute began about the superiority of the moderns over the ancients. In any case, the unimaginable revolutions in the natural sciences proved that a progress beyond classical science was possible and real. It is a question, however, whether this progress was a fundamental progress, a progress in the foundation. If one turns with this question to the modern *philosophers*, then all will answer that also in philosophy the moderns got further than the ancients. And this getting further is indeed quite evident; for assuming equal effort and equal seriousness, must not {454} science also progress with the progressing of time?

Certainly so, if one assumes in addition the same starting-point.

In contrast to this predominant awareness of progress and progressiveness in the more recent centuries, however, stands the fact that in these centuries the conviction of the *authoritative significance of the Greeks* keeps breaking through. From this point of view, the fight against the Middle Ages appears as an attempt to recover Greek freedom, Greek science. At the beginning of modern philosophy stands the Renaissance, the renaissance of *antiquity*. In fact, the fight against the Scholastics is in considerable part conducted in *the manner of opposing genuine Greek science*—whether it be Aristotle himself, or Plato, or Democritus and Epicurus—to the *corrupt* Greek science of Scholasticism.

Now, one can say: this *counter-movement* is always a misunderstanding or only a device or a subsequent corrective of the *real* movement, which is a movement of *progress*. This remark is surely justified within certain limits—namely, insofar as one keeps to the *explicit consciousness* of the newer centuries. But if one looks at what went on *in reality*, then one gets a different impression.

Even the fiercest opponents of the Greeks believed themselves able to put into effect the progress they had in mind only after they had laid the foundation for it by a *return*, namely, by a return to *nature*. Rousseau's call to *return* to nature, which has become part of our collective memory, is only *one* example of that and not even the best one. The reversionary character of modern philosophy shows itself much more fundamentally in the fact that is decisive for the whole span of the 17th and 18th centuries: in the *fight against prejudices* that fills these centuries. The word "prejudice" is indeed the Enlightenment's polemical keyword—it is met with so to speak on every page of every writing of the Enlightenment. One must *free* oneself from prejudices, and this freeing is accomplished by *retreating* to a plane, or even a point, from which one can finally free progress of prejudice once and for all.

Today's reader of a writing from the Age of Enlightenment {455} in which prejudices are fought so fiercely will often have to smile when he realizes just how strong were the prejudices of the supposedly prejudice-free gentlemen of the Enlightenment. One could even say: the century of the Enlightenment was the century of prejudices. We today are therefore very cautious in the use of the word "prejudice." *Historical consciousness* has corrected us in that it is not possible for man to live prejudice-free: every age has *its* prejudices; and the fight against prejudices *as such* always only means the fight against the prejudices of *others*—for with one's own prejudices there is the awkwardness of not being able to know them *as* prejudices. If then only historical consciousness has set us straight about the universal

significance of the category of “prejudice,” the *overcoming*²⁸ of *historical consciousness* would bring with it the *overcoming of the universal significance of “prejudice.”*

With respect to questioning historical consciousness it was said: if everything human is historical, then historical consciousness is also historical; that is, destined at some time to be no more. This historical conditionality of historical consciousness can be demonstrated concretely by the category of “prejudice.”

The word “prejudice” is older than modern philosophy—but only in the Age of Enlightenment does it achieve *authoritative* significance. What Greek philosophy fought against was opinion or appearance, not prejudice. (However, νόμῳ φύσει.)²⁹ How did “prejudice” get this authoritative significance in the Age of the Enlightenment?

About this we receive a remarkable piece of information from a famous scholastic of the 12th century. This philosopher cites in an important context an enumeration by Alexander of Aphrodisias of the reasons for the differences of opinion in philosophy, for the difficulties of philosophizing. 3 reasons are dealt with there, which all express the *natural* difficulties of philosophizing, that is, such difficulties as exist *always*, at *all* times where human beings philosophize. Now, this scholar adds to this enumeration the following words:

In our time there exists a fourth reason, which he (*sc.*, Alexander of Aphrodisias) did not mention, since it did not exist among them; namely, *habit* and *schooling*; for human beings by nature love what they are habituated to and incline to it...this happens to man regarding the opinions in {456} which he has grown up: he loves them and holds on to them and stays away from differing opinions. For this reason as well, therefore, man is prevented from knowing the truth. This happens to the multitude regarding God’s corporeality...due to habituation in the *writings* in which one firmly believes and to which one is habituated, whose literal meaning seems to indicate God’s corporeality.³⁰

Now surely there were many Greek writings in which the gods were presented corporeally. Why did these writings not compromise Greek philosophy? It is therefore not being accustomed to writings in general, not having grown up in a tradition in general, but rather being accustomed to *very specific* writings, having grown up in a tradition of a *very specific* character: namely, in a tradition possessing an *authority* as *unconditional* as that of the *tradition of revealed religions*. The fact that a tradition based on revelation entered the world of philosophy increased the *natural* difficulties of philosophizing by adding the *historical* difficulty.

In other words: The natural difficulties of philosophizing have their classical depiction in Plato’s allegory of the cave. The historical difficulty may be illustrated by saying: there *now* exists another cave *beneath* the Platonic cave.

The Enlightenment’s whole fight against prejudices is in a sense sketched and thus anticipated in the cited statement from the 12th century. The statement sheds a

²⁸ Ger.: Aufhebung.

²⁹ Gk.: by convention, by nature.

³⁰ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* I 31.

new light on this fight: the Enlightenment's fight against prejudices did not have the absolute meaning that the Enlightenment itself attached to it; and not because man always has and must have prejudices, but precisely the reverse, because prejudices in the strict sense of the word are only the "prejudices" of the revealed religions. This implies that the fight against prejudices has reached its end only when revealed religion has been called into question in its foundation and in its consequences.

If then the Enlightenment's fight against prejudices is only the fight against *the* historical difficulty of philosophizing, then the true goal of this fight is only: the recovery of philosophizing in its natural difficulty, of natural philosophizing, that is, of Greek philosophy. {457}

[Draft of an Alternative Introduction]

Preliminary Remark

We are all convinced that there is an unambiguous distinction between good and bad; therefore also between virtue and vice. Hence we distinguish between virtuous and vicious actions with the confidence of sleepwalkers. We are so sure of this distinction that we are even able to distinguish between virtuous and vicious *topics*. It is virtuous, say, to examine the questions of the sources of the collected Hippocratic writings or the connection between Hellenistic philosophy and the formation of Islamic sects; it is *still* virtuous if one grasps how Plato presents his teacher Socrates, or if one reconstructs a whole philosophical system from meager relics. To speak about vicious topics in public is not unobjectionable. Let it only be said that among the vicious topics there is nothing more vicious than the one we want to talk about tonight: the intellectual situation of the present. The proof of this is that a true scholar³¹ will never occupy himself with this question in his capacity as scholar; the scholar knows that making a conjecture or finding evidence of filiation is a much greater blessing than occupying himself with things that may be more interesting, but that can only be talked about vaguely. If scholars are the embodiment of virtue, then writers³² are the embodiment of vice. What we are attempting tonight is thus writer-like. And that is so by necessity. Imagine, if you please, that someone wanted to speak about the intellectual situation in the 14th century. In order to do this in the right manner, he would have to have studied for years; he would have to have become a specialist in the 14th century. Since without a doubt infinitely *more* is being written today than in the 14th century, how many years would someone have to have studied the intellectual situation of the present in order to be capable of treating it in a scholarly way. I have to confess for my part that I am far from being a specialist in the present. I am not embarrassed to say that I have never read nor heard a word by either Graf Keyserlingk or Margarete Susmann.³³ Not only will my claims often lack a sufficient material foundation—the claims will also often appear to you as in themselves confused {458} or otherwise defective. I am here—with asking for your indulgence.

³¹ See note 3.

³² Ger.: *Literaten*.

³³ See "Conspicivism" (appendix A), p. 219.

But why talk about such a matter at all, a matter that appears not to allow for scholarly treatment? Well—even the most virtuous man occasionally has the need to take a break from his virtue. Or, to say it less frivolously: it is good for even the most respectable scholar to put the books aside for once and do some thinking like a simple man of the people. Whatever he comes up with then does not need to be right, it does not need to be more than a reasonable conjecture; but it may be useful for his respectable work nonetheless.

Presupposing historical consciousness, the question concerning what is right compels the question concerning the situation of the present. Is this path *really* necessary? If all human thinking is in itself historical, then it has been arranged that we—when *we*, that is, men of *this* present world asking about what is right *as such*, believe we have found what is right *as such*—have thereby eo ipso found the answer that corresponds to our world, the *present* ideal of life. We cannot escape the *fate* of historicity—but we need not be concerned about that in our thought.

Fate as Principle

Historical consciousness must no longer be the *principle*. In what sense must historical consciousness be called into question? Insofar as it leads to the question concerning the situation of the present. It leads to this question only insofar as it is made the *principle* of questioning, insofar as it wants to be more than knowledge of the conditions and the fates of questioning.

Now, this path is in no way necessary. If everything human is in itself historically conditioned, then, without our needing to concern ourselves about it, it has been arranged that in searching for *the* ideal of life we are bound to find only the one that corresponds to our world, to the present, the *present* ideal of life. If everything human is itself historical, then *for just that reason* we do not need to be concerned with the historicity of our question. It is not the knowledge of historicity as such that leads to the explicit question concerning the present ideal of life and therefore concerning the situation of the present, but *incorporating* the knowledge of historicity, [i.e.,] historical consciousness, into the {459} question, making it the element, the presupposition, the *principle* of the question—when this knowledge in fact pertains only to the conditions and fates of questioning. But if the primary question of the human being who does not live in a binding given order is the question concerning a binding reasonable order, it is this *question* alone that must primarily occupy him and not the fate and the condition of this question. And only if it turns out that he cannot answer this primary question of his without considering the conditions and fates—*then and only then* does his historicity matter to him. That he needs this *detour*, however, must be demonstrated; it is not at all self-evident. Of course, we cannot avoid this detour today. Why that is the case, I will attempt to show, by³⁴

³⁴Here Strauss's draft of an alternative introduction breaks off in mid-sentence.

[Plan of the Lecture in Draft]

1. The disreputability of the topic—the scholar adjusts his ambition to speaking only on topics with respect to which, as far as knowledge of the material and its intellectual penetration are concerned, he can step forth as if clad in iron armor. At least I for my part do not at all have the reassuring awareness—here no one can damage or hurt me, here I am a first-class expert—concerning the topic I am going to speak about tonight. Nevertheless it appears to me permissible to speak about it. For the iron armor of scholarship in each case clads a being scarcely made of iron, a human being who doubts. Not to voice these doubts because they themselves are unclear, as are the speculations that [come] from concerning oneself with these doubts³⁵
2. Why does the situation of the present matter to us Jews? → Impossibility of understanding “Law.” Reservations and prejudices.
3. a) Question *ambiguous*
 b) Question not *natural* but *historical*.
 c) Situation of the present characterized by the question concerning it. Why? Why not concerning situation in biblical time or Greek golden age?
 d) Destruction of the power of the tradition by the Enlightenment: {460} Enlightenment fights traditions in the name of the principles of the tradition.
 e) Nietzsche calls the principles into question: we are *totally* free. But for what?
 f) No binding principles any more. Radical ignorance, necessity of questioning.
 g) Being compelled to question as any age, we are less capable of questioning than any age.
 i) “Value judgments” not scientifically justifiable (according to Weber).—Free decision of the person, anarchy—does not take place in a vacuum, however, but is conditioned by *history*. *Historical consciousness*—seems to guarantee the overcoming³⁶ of anarchy.
 k) Meanwhile historical consciousness makes the question concerning the right life impossible—at best the *present* ideal of life → question concerning the intellectual situation of the present. Therefore: *situation of the present characterized by historical consciousness*.
 l) This question not capable of being answered. Hence no orientation, and consequently no life: we are incapable of living.
 m) Perversion and unnaturalness. But nevertheless we are *natural* beings—in that we *question*. Natural beings threatened in our naturalness by an unnatural world.

³⁵ [The text breaks off here in the middle of the line. LS has left blank a space of two lines to the next period and has noted in the left margin:] *Duckmäuserei in dem Nichtbehandeln des Themas* [cowardice/hypocrisy in the non-treatment of the topic] {HM}

³⁶ Ger.: *Überwindung*.

³⁷ Ger.: *aufgehoben*.

- n) Our unnaturalness shows itself to us in [the form of] historical consciousness insofar as this is understood in the way that it leads to the question concerning the situation of the present. Therefore: division of historical consciousness.
- o) Possibility of this division in principle: but not relapse into barbarism? Thus: historical consciousness has *progressed* when compared to *naïve* consciousness. That is: *Being fundamentally ignorant we cannot come to knowledge since we know too much, believe we know too much*. If, then, we are therefore to come to *knowledge*, then this belief in knowing must be overcome.³⁷ *Historical consciousness must be overcome insofar as it means: it itself constitutes as such a superior manner of knowing*.
- p) How do things really stand concerning our progressiveness? While the progressive tendency is primary, modern philosophy is always characterized by a countermovement—and not only as a condition independent of it, but as its condition proper.—State of *nature*. *Liberation from prejudices*. The meaning³⁸ of modern philosophy must be understood in light of this *fundamental* intention {461} of this philosophy.
- q) “Prejudice” and historical consciousness.
 - i) Historical consciousness can be interpreted by means of the category of “prejudice”.
 - ii) Prejudice a historical category.
RMbM³⁹ citation
- r) Natural and historical difficulties of philosophizing—the meaning of the fight against prejudices is liberation from the historical difficulties. First and second cave.
- s) Modern philosophy’s self-interpretation as progress hides this meaning completely. It leads to a continuous erosion of the tradition, in accordance with the intention of the reversionary tendency, while it leads at the same time to the consolidation of a new tradition—the modern tradition. A process of destruction that passes itself off as a process of construction.
- t) *Finally* one stands at the foundation of the tradition—one stands at the starting-point of the questioning from which the tradition has arisen—without knowing it, or in any case, without drawing the consequences from it. Nietzsche’s significance: Socratic question is not posed seriously, but is cut off by a dictate. Inner lack of clarity: Callicles⁴⁰ and intellect⁴¹ (order of humanity).
- u) In any case, Nietzsche has enabled us to understand the Socratic question again, to recognize it as *our* question. The Platonic dialogues are no longer *self-evident* for us—no longer self-evidently all right, no longer self-evidently wrong, surpassed, out of date, but we read them as if we were conducting them ourselves if we were capable of doing that.

³⁷ Ger.: *Sinn*. Likewise in subsections r) and s).

³⁸ That is, Maimonides. See note 8 of appendix B.

⁴⁰ Cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 481b–527e (esp. 482c–486d).

⁴¹ Ger.: *Geist*.

But we are not capable of doing that, since all the concepts that we *are equipped with* derive from the modern tradition. *This is what* we have to know—*this is why* we have to concern ourselves with the intellectual situation of the present. The question betrays the awareness of the fact that the question concerning what is right *cannot* be answered *without* being clear about our incapacity to question—but this question is fundamentally misguided if it is supposed to replace the real question.

The question concerning the intellectual situation of the present should serve {462} to awaken in us the willingness to come out of the cave of modernity—it is absurd if asked for its own sake: it would then amount to our describing the interior decor of the 2nd cave.

Historical consciousness has the function of leading us back to the natural questions. It is a self-misunderstanding of historical consciousness if it pretends to be a higher type of knowing.

v) *Plato and the Nomos and Revelation*